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AUTHOR Goodman, Kenneth S.
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ABSTRACT

The need for schools and teachers who accept and understand language differences is briefly discussed. Key problems in understanding language difference are described, and effective means of motivating children to become more effective and flexible in language use are prescribed. (DB)

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WHO GAVE US THE RIGHT?

Kenneth S. Goodman

Though the battle cries are different now and the groupings are different and the stated reasons for taking sides are certainly different the key issue in our schools today remains the same as it has been for several decades. Are our schools agencies of conformity designed to make the abilities, interests, preferences, values, habits, aspirations and speech of all pupils

Dr. Kenneth S. Goodman is Professor of Elementary Education at Wayne State University (Detroit, Mich.). He is currently the chairman of the IRA Committee on Psycholinguistics and Reading and member of several professional committees. He has published in a number of prestigious journals and is co-author of Language and Thinking in the Elementary School and Reading: Process and Program.

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much the same, all safely within the prescribed limits of social acceptability? Or are our schools prepared to accept difference as a human right and cultural pluralism as the most vital characteristic of American society. Are they willing to accept the obligation to assist each pupil in becoming himself?

No matter what the source, no matter how strong the pressure or how sincere the motive behind it, the schools must not respond by succumbing to demands which would make them assembly lines for turning children into look-alike dolls, so many Barbies and Kens, some black and some white but all pressed in the same mold.

The behaviorists stand ready with their behavioral goals to redesign live children into look-alike, talk-alike, think-alike plastic people. We must drive the behavior changers out of the temples of learning because we do not have the right. And no one has the right to give it to us. Even the parents.

Parents of course have both the legal and moral right to make demands and decisions on behalf of their children. But they are ultimately accountable to these children both legally and morally. The kids are telling us that loudly and clearly.

It is time as educators we face, for ourselves and our communities, that we are accountable above all else to the *pupils* whom we serve. Somehow in the push pull arena in which educational decisions are made it's easy to forget about the kids—who they are, what they are, and where they're going.

With the kids in mind and with a clear focus on our obligations to them let's examine language issues and discuss positions which we can defend to them now and in the future when they fully realize what we've done to and for them.

Helping Skilled Users of Language Become More Effective Users of Language

Clearly schools have an obligation to help kids to increase their effectiveness in using language. That goal can not be accomplished in an atmosphere of hostile conflict in which we force young people to choose between identity and conformity. If black is beautiful then so is the way black people speak.

If we treat their language as inferior, deficient or inadequate we force the learners, in the very act of accepting our benevolent promise to give them better language, to accept this characterization of themselves and their means of communication, thought and learning as unworthy.

Linguistic Deficiency

If they were in fact linguistically deficient we would have to face such bitter truth in our teaching and in our curriculum making. But the truth is that the language every child learns is the language of his home and his immediate social community. Each child learns his language in much the same way, for much the same purposes, and in any group the range of effectiveness in using the language of the group is about the same as it is in all other human groups.

The myth of linguistic deprivation is as much a fraud as the myth of genetic difference in intelligence between blacks and whites which has been perpetrated recently by behavior changers. They've made the mold in their own image, measured all against this mold and found some wanting simply because they don't fit the mold. Having reduced some groups by this device

to sub-human status the behavior changers thus at once reduce their accountability for success in achieving even their own goals with such groups and at the same time justify the application of teaching-learning models derived from the study of sub-human animal forms like rats, pigeons, and chimpanzees.

Every child is born with the capacity to acquire language and he does so. In order to justify treating some children as inferior the behavior changers must ignore the fact that this capacity to learn language is innately and uniquely human and must furthermore demean the language and language learning capacity of these children.

Perhaps the crucial point which must be countered as this case for inferiority is argued is that some children, black or brown or red or poor white lack language suitable for dealing with the kinds of tasks schools pose. In this argument a remarkable leap in logic is made. Schools are urged to reject the language of so called non-standard speakers as inferior (which is essentially what schools have been doing all along) and then the reaction to that rejection on the part of the learners is cited as evidence that in truth they lack adequate language. If a black child chooses to hang his head when he's asked a question rather than subject himself to possible rejection he is labeled non-verbal. If he does venture to present his developing understanding to teacher or tester in his own language he is labeled as deficient in vocabulary and grammar because he is different in vocabulary and grammar. And what's even worse the assumption is made that he isn't learning. In point of fact the child himself will be confused as to whether he is learning or can learn because when he attempts to organize his experience and concepts in his own language and present them to teachers and classmates he is told that he is speaking unacceptably. Whether this is done rudely or lovingly the net effect is confusion on the part of the learner who can not sort out the rejection of language from the ideas he seeks to present. The teacher may not understand him if the teacher has not taken the trouble to listen and become familiar with the language of the learners, but the teacher may also pretend not to understand in order to force the child to shift to unfamiliar higher status forms. In this latter case the hypocrisy reaches a peak since the prime purpose of language use, effective communication, ceases to be a relevant issue.

Under pressure to be accountable for the learning they foster, teachers need to be accountable to themselves to get the cobwebs out of their views of language, language difference, language learning, and their own roles as teachers in the lives of their pupils.

Teachers need particularly to sort out the linguistic, sociological, psychological, and pedagogical realities of language.

A key problem in understanding language difference and reacting to it is the confusion of social attitudes toward language with intrinsic linguistic merit. Teachers have treated language as good or bad, right or wrong, on the basis of the social status which particular language forms enjoy among the high status people in their communities. It's not surprising that high status people think their language is the standard on which to judge all others. Most people are ethnocentric, thinking all others speak quaintly or poorly. Because of the power in the hands of high status groups other groups in society may even partially accept the view of their language as being of little merit. Yet clearly language difference and language deficiency are not synonymous. Linguistic study reveals that all dialects are fully functioning language variants each with systematic phonology, grammatical structure, and vocabulary. Whether the language

community into which a child is born is the inner city or the plush suburb he learns that language form (dialect) which will be most functional for him in his communicative needs. What he learns is systematic and rule governed though the rules and system will vary from other dialects of the same language. A child's effectiveness in using language can only be judged within the language form he has learned as he uses it to cope with the communicative needs he has.

From the point of view of psychology we must understand that every child acquires language competence before he comes to school and that the language he has learned has become not only the medium of communication, but also the medium of thought and of learning. Human ability to learn and generate language as individuals in social interaction is so universal that it can be said that if a person can think a thought he can find the means of expressing it within the language available to him, by stretching or modifying that language, or by inventing new language on the basis of the old. In acquiring new concepts and coping with new experience the learner draws on that language form which is available to him. Attempts at imposing less familiar dialects however high their status or however low the status of his own, interfere with learning and cut the child off from the very medium of learning which is his major resource, *his language*.

Urban speakers of low status dialects will acquire *receptive* control over the various dialects they hear spoken in the community as they need to have such receptive control. Ironically this gives them a linguistic advantage over their sub-urban high-status peers who may never understand any dialect other than their own. Evidence of this receptive control over a range of dialects is shown in the way youngsters understand their teachers' dialects but repeat or respond to them within their own dialects. The child has the receptive control to match phonological and grammatical patterns in the dialect foreign to his own, even to handle vocabulary differences, but he does not yet have the ability to generate the response in the strange dialect instead switching to his own code. This receptive control is not likely to exist to any large extent among school beginners yet it is almost universal among sixth graders though the extent of control may vary. Movement toward receptive control of a range of dialects necessary for linguistic functioning in his expanding world may in fact be considered part of the natural expansion of the child's linguistic competence. Acquisition of the ability to generate language, either in speaking or writing, in these less familiar dialects is by no means as universal. That appears to depend on complex factors of need and motivation as the child moves into new social, educational and cultural situations.

Pedagogically we know that language change can not be forced and that language flexibility is not to any great degree a function of intensity of instruction. There is almost no evidence in fact to indicate that people can be formally taught to use other dialects in preference to their own. The most effective means of influencing learners to become more effective and more flexible in language use appears to be still to provide many opportunities to use language in relationship to expanding knowledge and experience. For generations pupils have rejected the efforts of teachers to apply a correct language model to their language and force change.

Bringing these linguistic, sociological, psychological, pedagogical factors together teachers can summarily dismiss forceable intervention in the language of learners. It is not necessary, desirable or practical. By working with the child rather than at cross purposes to him, we help him to expand on what he can do. We help him become more effective without rejecting what he is now. At the same time we accept the richness of

difference instead of the sterility of conformity. Our goal then is not to change behavior but to expand competence.

To achieve this goal we need schools and teachers who accept and understand language difference, who are able to encourage children to continue to use the language they bring to school in learning, who provide stimulating relevant learning environments for their pupils, who exemplify themselves rich, varied and appropriate language use rather than up-tight proper language. If we succeed, we will find our pupils opening outward and ever expanding on the base of their linguistic competence. If we do not we will hear them openly shouting or quietly muttering, "F'get you, honky, f'get you oreol"